

COMPARING RUSSIAN TRENDS IN THE PIANO SONATAS OF
RACHMANINOFF AND MEDTNER

BY

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Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the piano sonatas of Nikolai Medtner and Sergei Rachmaninoff were some of the first major works in the genre written by a Russian composer. The piano sonata had been largely ignored by the older generation of Russian composers, who preferred to concentrate on orchestral and operatic literature. A few Russian piano sonatas were written before 1900, but nothing had established itself as a firm staple in the piano repertoire. Among these were piano sonatas written by Rubinstein, Balakirev, Tchaikovsky, Glazunov, and Scriabin (at this point, only the first three). If there was any chance of the sonatas of Medtner and Rachmaninoff becoming the first major sonatas to be recognized as a grand Russian achievement, it was soon eradicated by the spread of the modernist movement. Scriabin and Prokofiev were to take the sonata form and reinvigorate the genre with innovations in harmony and form, and Stravinsky was to create a firestorm with his *Rite of Spring* in 1913. In this midst of all of this, Rachmaninoff's and Medtner's work in the sonata genre had been lost in the sweep. Both composers' output was dismissed as neo-romantic and insignificant compared to the newer exploratory works of their colleagues. They were accused of writing in a 19th century style and imbuing their works with nationalism. Is the modernist movement really responsible for the lack of popularity of these sonatas? Perhaps Rachmaninoff's *Piano Sonata No. 2* is the only work to have bypassed this stigma, owing its success to many performances in competitions and recitals, but his first sonata and practically all fourteen of Medtner's piano sonatas are hardly known among the public (and even musicians). In order to understand the reason for their unpopularity, it is important to investigate the amount of nationalist tendencies, identify innovative ideas, and explore the compositional methods of both composers to determine if the sonatas were truly a fault of their time period, or of their construction.

There is a tremendous amount of originality in these sonatas, and very little in the way of nationalist tendencies on the surface (there are no actual folk-song or Russian Orthodox chant quotes in these sonatas). Rachmaninoff and Medtner were not concerned with creating music that was authentically Russian, as the *Kuchka* ("The Five") had set out to do before them. Their influence had been developed in Moscow with their teacher Tanayev, where the music of the west was held in high regard and was considered the pinnacle of form. Things may have been different had they studied in St. Petersburg, where

the importance of Russian folk music was stressed above all other genres, but their training in Moscow embedded in them a foundation of western thought. Nevertheless, there are identifiable traits of Russianness in their works, and this will be expanded upon in the following pages. Nationalism did play a role in the construction of these piano sonatas, but more so in the form of unconscious influence rather than intentional inclusion.

When compared to the Russian piano sonatas of the previous generation, Rachmaninoff and Medtner's sonatas can hardly be grouped in the same category as their older counterparts. Their sonatas are substantial works that in their own right appear modern when compared to the romantic works of the 19th century. The Medtner sonatas are highly original, containing formal designs, rhythms, and harmonies that are unique only to his compositional style. The Rachmaninoff sonatas contain pianism that has not been seen since the Liszt and Chopin piano sonatas, and they also contain highly chromatic passagework and experimental harmonies atypical of the Romantic genre. If these composers are faulted for composing at the wrong time in history, let us remember that Bach and Chopin were conservatives in their own time and history has treated them kindly. This essay will attempt to reveal the real innovations in Medtner's and Rachmaninoff's piano sonatas that have been ignored by decades of dismissal from musical circles and the public.

Richard A. Leonard in his book, "A History of Russian Music" described Rachmaninoff's music: "From first to last it remained in the nineteenth-century romantic tradition."¹ Regarding Medtner: "Never a brilliant composer but widely respected was Nicolas Medtner"² Stereotypes such as these have permeated musicological circles for decades, and have led to the dismissal of both composers' output as negligible. The goal of this study is to strike back against the notion that both composers strictly adhered to tradition and offered nothing new. Another misconception is the pairing of these two composers as one in the same. While there are similarities, their approach to composition couldn't have been more different. A discussion on their mutual influence, as well as their views on program music, will follow as it is directly related to the conception of these sonatas.

¹ Richard A. Leonard, *A History of Russian Music*. (United States of America: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), 227.

² Ibid., 341.

Chapter 1: National Influence in Russian Music

This section will discuss the Russian elements in the music of both composers, and in order to do so it must be clear what exactly is meant by “Russian”. Literary critic Edmund Wilson, around 1900, stated that Russians are “formless and unkempt; gloomy; crudely realistic; morbid and hysterical, and mystical.”³ This stereotype is often applied to Russian music, with adjectives such as sad, gloomy, and yearning associated with the genre. What is surprising is that before 1830, the term Russian Style would have had no meaning. One can attribute the search for a national style beginning with the philosophy of German critic Johann Gottfried von Herder, who, in the late 18th century, believed that folk-song was crucial to develop a correct picture of a nation’s self-image⁴. This spawned a search for a Russian identity by the Russian followers of Herder, and the discovery led to the reemergence of the folk-song genre *protiyazhnaya* which translates to “drawn-out-song”⁵. This genre somehow managed to become the “authentic” model of traditional Russian Music, despite the fact that many authentic folk-song models existed. The *protiyazhnaya* was characterized as a long, sorrowful melody and filled with the Russian soul. Folk-music that centered on cheerful subjects did not fit the narrative for an authentic Russian essence and were brushed aside and dismissed for their lack of “Russianness”.

Marina-Frolova Walker in her book *Russian Music and Nationalism* discusses how the historians and musicians of the time did not take into account how peasant folk songs might have been tainted by the influences from the west, or from urban cultures adding their own characteristics to the music to make it more accessible to the region.⁶ Many of the great Russian composers were oblivious to this, and assumed that what they heard was an ancient melody still mostly intact. Balakirev’s collection of Russian folk songs is mainly harmonized using western harmonies, and it is impossible to know how much the original melody had evolved since its origin. Therefore our entire belief on what is a Russian characteristic may have been

³ Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 1.

⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ Ibid., 33-37.

spawned by misinformation on a large scale. Nevertheless, the image of the sorrowful Russian soul persisted as an authentic characteristic of Russian music.

This stereotype lasted for a good half of a century, and perhaps the turning point was led by the two operas of Glinka.⁷ The first opera, *Life of the Tsar*, contains an example of the *protyazhnaya* at the very beginning, and conforms to the sorrowful nature of the Russian Folk-song. The second opera, *Ruslan*, was the complete opposite. Although it contained some elements of Western music as its influence, its general affect was cheerful and strikingly original. This led to some criticism regarding its Russian characteristics, but it was extremely influential to the composers of the Kuchka (The Five) who would expand upon its cheerful moods and incorporate them into their own works.⁸ Thus, a completely new definition of the Russian Style was emerging in the musical world, but it failed to overtake the gloomy stereotype that described all things Russian.

It was the new exotic Russian music that Diaghilev was premiering in the west at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was much more fantastic and festive than the *protyazhnaya*, and showed a different aspect of Russian culture altogether.⁹ A general pushback was occurring in musicological circles suggesting that what was considered “Russian” at that point in time was in fact tainted by the west; that true Russian music was at the risk of being forgotten, and must be revived. The influence of “The Five” as being the sole authority on Russian nationalism in music was beginning to wane, and a surge of investigation into pure Russian folk music was led by a small group of musicologists and composers.¹⁰ This was short-lived, however, as none of the composers in this movement composed anything substantial, and the musicologists attempted to carry the torch for the movement with obscure articles and poor scholarship.¹¹ These efforts to create an authentically Russian musical aesthetic seemed to do just the opposite: composers during this time period tended to create music devoid of any national identity. Rachmaninoff and Medtner composed in this time period, but they had little to do these musicological trends.

⁷ Ibid., 41-42.

⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., xi.

¹¹ Ibid., xii.

1910 marked an important year for the history of the modern movement. Artist Vasili Kandinsky produced his *First Abstract Water Colour* in this year, and he would later meet Schoenberg in the latter half of the year and would become friends.¹² Scriabin began to develop his new compositional style in this year, and the symbolist movement in literature, with its emphasis on mysticism and the use of symbolic language, would come to an end.¹³ Balakirev died in this year, and Rimsky Korsakov passed away two years earlier. The old Nationlist School was coming to an end, and the modernism movement emerging. Composer Artur Laurié had begun composing in microtone intervals, which lead to the emergence of a society for quarter tone music in Leningrad in 1923.¹⁴ 1910 marked a division between the old Nationalist school and the rising avant-garde, and this occurred right in the middle of the timeline of Medtner's sonatas as well as Rachmaninoff's. Medtner composed his sonatas from 1902 to 1937, and Rachmaninoff's two sonatas were written in 1908 and 1913 respectively.

After the Revolution of 1917, Russian Nationalism became banished in the new Soviet Union until the 1930s when it resurged in Stalin's regime to be used for political purposes.¹⁵ 1929 marked the year when state control of the arts took full effect.¹⁶ It went so far that in 1948, all modern music was purged for the sake of preserving 'traditional' Russian music. Interestingly enough, Rachmaninoff was one of the composers whose music was purged for 'modernist' techniques.¹⁷ The history of Russia is filled with periods of zeal for searching for a cultural identity as well as periods of destroying all evidence of it. Rachmaninoff and Medtner both stayed out of politics, composing their music from internal influences rather than external influences. Russian characteristics do make appearances in their highly original works, but never define them. The piano sonatas are a case in point: Elements of Russian folk-song and literary influences occur in small sections throughout the sonatas, but only in fleeting moments. The following section will discuss the Russian influences in both composers' sonatas, as well as external influences from other sources.

¹² Peter D Roberts, *Modernism in Russian Piano Music: Scriabin, Prokofiev, and Their Russian Contemporaries* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 2.

¹³ Roberts, *Modernism*, 2-3.

¹⁴ Roberts, *Modernism*, 3.

¹⁵ Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, xii.

¹⁶ Roberts, *Modernism*, 1.

¹⁷ Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, 347.

Chapter 2: Nationalism in Medtner's Sonatas

Specific Russian Influence

According to Barrie Martyn in his book *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music*, “Medtner, like his compatriot Taneyev, exhibits no specific national identity, but when he sets Russian poetry of, as in some of the so-called ‘Fairy Tales’, treats Russian themes, his nationality strongly asserts itself.”¹⁸ This contrasts with musicologist Alfred J. Swan’s statement, “He had a singularly colorless mind and built his compositions from dense, refractory material, structuring them in huge blocks, with not an echo of folk-song or chant.”¹⁹ Although contrasting, both statements agree on the following: Medtner’s Russianness is not always clear to the listener. Medtner made no attempt to banish his Russian influences, but made no attempt to showcase them either. He devoted an entire chapter on influence and imitation in his book, *The Muse and the Fashion*, in which he said the following:

In criticizing works of art we always try to find in them traces of influence and imitation, and we often confuse these notions.

Influence presupposes a natural coincidence of the individual focuses of the one who exerts the influence and the one who undergoes it. Imitation presupposes an absence of the individual prism in the one who imitates.

The effect of influence is an important symptom of spontaneity, of something that is inborn, is a natural heritage, while imitation is a proof of helplessness, of lack of roots, of a misunderstanding of the substance.

Influence always starts from the substance, the contents, unity; imitation from details, from the coverlet (periphery), a misunderstood unity (emptiness).

All the great masters, the geniuses of art, have been subject to influence, while it is always the dullards, the apprentices, and the dilettantes by nature who imitate.²⁰

Medtner’s condemnation of imitation certainly coincides with his lack of musical quotations in his piano sonatas. Traces of Russian influence can still be found scattered throughout the works, however. These traces are evident in the folk-like melodies and rhythms, epigraphs and titles from Russian sources, and quotes from Russian poets.

His very first *Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 5* contains no special inscription or epigraph. It is a four-movement work, and shows no variance from the traditional piano sonata in terms of form. However,

¹⁸ Barrie Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner: His Life and Music* (England: Scholar Press, 1995), xi-xii.

¹⁹ Alfred J. Swan, *Russian Music: and its Sources in Chant and Folk-song* (London: John Baker LTD, 1973), 177.

²⁰ Nicolas Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion*, trans. and rev. Alfred J. Swan (Haverford, PA: Haverford College Bookstore, 1951), 112-113.

Russian influence is first evident in the folk-like melody of the opening. Consider the melodic similarity of this first theme and the opening of Balakirev's *Sonata in B-flat minor* (composed around the same time period) in Ex. 2.1 and Ex. 2.2:

Example 2.1 Medtner, *Piano Sonata in F Minor, Op. 5, (I)* ²¹



Example 2.2 Balakirev, *Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 102, (I)* ²²



Both works have similar melodic contours and style: a leap to a fifth and then a descending escape tone to the third in a minor key. Balakirev's is actually a direct quote from his collection of Russian folk melodies, *Sobiraytes'-ka, bratsi-rebyatyshki* (Gather, Brothers), which Rimsky-Korsakov also incorporated into his piano concerto. The melodies are similar, but Medtner's theme never materializes into the long melodic line that Balakirev employed, and instead becomes fragmented into short motives. This makes the Russian folk connection less obvious, and it is the reason that Medtner's music often seems devoid of national tendencies. Medtner's melodies typically have a very lyrical character and share much in common with folk songs. Consider the openings of these piano sonatas by Medtner:

²¹ Nikolai Medtner, *Piano Sonata, Op. 5*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom I: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1959); score.

²² Mily Balakirev, *Piano Sonata No. 2*, (Leipzig: J. H. Zimmermann, n.d), score.

Example 2.3 Medtner, *Sonata Romantica, Op. 53 No. 1 (I)*²³



Example 2.4 Medtner, *Sonata-Idyll, Op. 56 (I)*²⁴



²³ Nikolai Medtner, *Piano Sonata, Op. 53 No. 1*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom IV: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1960); score.

²⁴ Nikolai Medtner, *Piano Sonata, Op. 56*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom IV: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1960); score.

Example 2.5 Medtner, *Sonata Op. 25, No. 2* ²⁵

Example 2.6 Medtner, *Sonata-Reminiscenza, from Forgotten Melodies Op. 38* ²⁶

²⁵ Nikolai Medtner, *Piano Sonata, Op. 25 No. 2*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom II: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1959); score.

²⁶ Nikolai Medtner, *Forgotten Melodies I, Op. 38*, (Leipzig: J. H. Zimmermann, 1922), score.

Example 2.7 Medtner, *Sonata-Ballade Op. 27, (I)* ²⁷



The melodies are very lyrical and many comparisons have been drawn between them and folk melodies. However, not a single actual folk song is quoted in these themes, and the melodies themselves are so different between each other that it is difficult to say which nationality they belong to.

Literary quotes in Medtner's sonatas also show signs of Russian influence. Like Schumann, literary works had a huge impact on his creative style, and he would often set his works to coincide with the poems of Russian and German authors. It should be noted that he did not give a strong preference for one nationality over the other. In his songs, for example, Medtner incorporated texts from German authors from 1906-1912, with only one Russian song in that time period. Then, in the next 13 years he would compose songs based solely on Russian poetry, mainly Pushkin.²⁸ The piano sonatas similarly contain quotes from Russian and German poems, yet these poems also bear no national identity. For example, the *Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27*, is based on a poem by Russian poet Fet, describing Christ's temptation in the wilderness.²⁹ The second and third movement sketches of this work contain direct quotes from the poem, 'Satan stole away' and 'And the angels came' respectively. *Piano Sonata Op. 25 No. 2* contains an epigraph from a Russian poem by Tyutchev, describing the night wind and tempests. These quotes have little to do with Russian nationalism.

In conclusion, Medtner's music can only be attributed to Russian characteristics by loose associations. Most of the piano sonatas are entirely original, and owe their influence to other western forms if anything. There is a bit more evidence of Russian influence in his art songs and shorter piano works, as

²⁷ Nikolai Medtner, *Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom II: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1959); score.

²⁸ Martyn, Nicolas Medtner, 30-31.

²⁹ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 96.

text from Russian folk-lore is used as inspiration, but besides snippets of melodic similarities in the sonatas and quotes from poems, the sonatas do not bear any easily recognizable Russian identity.

Non-Russian Influence in Medtner's Sonatas

With his family's German heritage and his Russian upbringing, Medtner has often been called the "Russian Brahms", a term that he did not much care for.³⁰ He himself did not see the resemblance in his compositional methods, yet some have gone as far as comparing his Op. 5 sonata to Brahms' *Third Piano Sonata*, which is also Op. 5.³¹ There may be some resemblances between the two-against-three textures which are found in in Medtner's *Piano Sonata Op. 11 No. 1*, and the third movement of Brahms' *Piano Sonata Op. 5*, but the nickname "Russian Brahms" most likely represents the general German and Russian nature of Medtner instead of direct comparisons between the composers. His Russian and German duality is evident from his earliest compositions: *Mood Pictures Op. 1* contains a poem from Russian Poet Lermontov, a Russian fairy is described in *Three Fantastic Improvisations Op. 2*, and settings of texts by Goethe and Pushkin can be found in the *Three Romances Op. 3*.

Medtner was particularly fond of Beethoven and studied the piano sonatas extensively. He was very well versed in the classic repertoire, but in later years he usually only performed Beethoven in conjunction with his own works, and Liszt only when the audience demanded it.³² The sonatas of Beethoven were a source of inspiration for him, and he expressed his fondness for them in much of his writing. *Sonate-Ballade Op. 21*, bears many resemblances to Beethoven's *Piano Sonata No. 28, Op. 101*, with both containing a very melodic opening and a large fugue before the end.

³⁰ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, xi.

³¹ Bobby Hughes Loftis, "The Piano Sonatas of Nicolai Medtner" (PhD diss., West Virginia University, 1970), 35.

³² Arthur Alexander, "Medtner as Pianist," in *Nicolas Medtner: A Tribute to his Art and Personality*, ed. Richard Holt (London: Dennis Dobson LTD, 1955), 93.

Example 2.8 Medtner, *Sonata-Ballade Op. 27, (II)* ³³



This sonata also resembles Chopin's Barcarolle in its rhythms and the trills found at the end of its themes. Although not a direct quote, Chopin's *Ballade No. 3* is hinted at in the chord progressions of the first movement of his *Sonata-Ballade*. See Ex. 2.9 and Ex. 2.10.

Example 2.9 Medtner, *Sonata-Ballade Op. 27, (I)* ³⁴

³³ Medtner, *Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, score.

³⁴ Nikolai Medtner, *Sonata-Ballade, Op. 27*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom II: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1959); score.

Example 2.10 Chopin, *Ballade No. 3, Op. 47*³⁵



Medtner claimed this work was a struggle of the light and dark of the human soul.³⁶ It had begun as a piano concerto, then turned into a cycle of short pieces, and then became a sonata. Many years later, Medtner wrote in English under the final chords, “Before the lord alone (only) can one kneel” which is a line from a poem by Fet.³⁷

Structurally, Medtner’s sonatas do not share a lot in common with the Beethoven sonatas, nor Chopin’s. Only two of the sonatas (Op. 5 and Op. 53) contain four movements. Many of Medtner’s sonatas are single movement works with slight modifications to the traditional sonata form. Sonata-Reminiscenza Op. 38 is a single movement work set inside of a group of other pieces entitled Forgotten Melodies Op. 38. It also contains an unusual double exposition where the second theme is changed upon the repeat. Medtner most likely studied the forms of the Beethoven sonatas to achieve the same feeling of cohesiveness that he felt was the direct result of the form.

Besides Beethoven and Chopin, Liszt was also an inspiration. *Sonata in G Minor Op. 22* is clearly inspired by the Liszt sonata. Both are very large single movement works that are comprised of smaller sub-movements without break. Medtner uses a repeating theme throughout all of these movements, and its contour is very similar to the cyclic theme of Liszt’s *Sonata in B minor*. Compare Ex. 2.11 and Ex. 2.12 :

³⁵ Frederic Chopin, *Ballade No. 3, Op. 47*, ed. Herrman Scholtz, (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, n.d.); score.

³⁶ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 96

³⁷ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 96.

Example 2.11 Medtner, *Sonata in G minor, Op. 22*³⁸



Example 2.12 Liszt, *Sonata in B minor*³⁹



Medtner's main influence of form for his piano sonatas can mostly be attributed to the formal designs of past sonatas, but his melodic content, harmonic usage, and rhythmic devices can hardly be considered borrowed material. Richard A. Leonard sums up the general attitudes towards Medtner in his book, *A History of Russian Music*, when he says "Medtner (who had in fact German blood) was at times completely indifferent to his Russian heritage, and composed as if he were a nineteenth century German. But just as often he made the Russian folk-song idiom the basis of his thoughtful craftsmanship, especially in the Fairy Tales."⁴⁰

Medtner's Russianness is difficult to ascertain in the sonatas, and much of the material is so original that it defies any national attribution. Perhaps Rachmaninoff's statement on Medtner is a bit more accurate: "Medtner is too much an individual to bear resemblance to anyone except the Russian composer Medtner."⁴¹

³⁸ Nikolai Medtner, *Piano Sonata Op. 22*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom II: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1959); score.

³⁹ Franz Liszt, *Sonata in B minor*, ed. Rafael Joseffy (New York: G. Schirmer, LMC No.861, 1909); score.

⁴⁰ Richard A. Leonard, *A History of Russian Music* (USA: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), 342.

⁴¹ Martyn, *Medtner*, xii.

Chapter 3: Nationalism in Rachmaninoff sonatas

Specific Russian Influence

Medtner once confided with musicologist Alfred J. Swan that ‘Rachmaninoff is so profoundly Russian himself that he is in no need of folk-music.’⁴² Rachmaninoff never quoted a direct Russian folk melody in his piano sonatas, and on rare occasion can we find a quote in any of his other works (his unpublished *Etudes-Tableaux in D-minor Op. 33 No. 5* bears snippets of the same folk melody quoted by Balakirev in his piano sonata, Ex.2.2). Elements of Russianness, however, are easily identifiable, more so than in Medtner. Symbolism (Russian bells and chants), modality, and the general melancholy of his works give them their obvious Russian characteristics. Another characteristic is the use of Orientalism, which we can find in the first sonata.

Orientalism was used by the Kuchka to separate Russian music from the works of the west. Rimsky-Korsakov and Balakirev in particular frequently incorporated orientalism into their works, and it became a known trait of traditional Russian music. Rachmaninoff’s *Oriental Dance, Op. 2* and his *Oriental Sketch for Piano* are two works that show homage to the style. Elements of it make its way into the first sonata. Note the flattened second and sixth in the following passage in the first movement:

⁴² Alfred J. Swan, *Russian Music: and its Sources in Chant and Folk-song* (London:John Baker LTD, 1973), 172.

Example 3.1 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28 (I)* ⁴³



Another clear example of Russian influence is the impact of chant music from the Russian Orthodox Church. In his childhood, he would often visit nearby churches and convents with his grandmother, and listen to the choirs and the church bells.⁴⁴ This experience had a profound effect on him, and many of his works contain chant-like sections. In the first sonata, a chorale is clearly suggested in the beginning:

⁴³ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, ed. Pavel Lamm and Konstantin Igumnov, (Moscow: Muzgiz, n.d.); score.

⁴⁴ Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 11.

Example 3.2 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28 (I)* ⁴⁵



The chants from the Russian Orthodox Church would later inspire him to compose the Vespers and the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. He never quoted traditional chants, but created his own melodies in the style of the old chants.⁴⁶

The second piano sonata shows its Russianness in its depiction of bells. Written at the same time as his symphonic work *The Bells*, where each movement depicts different types of bells to suit the text of the poem from Edgar Allen Poe, the second piano sonata features multiple passages emulating bell sounds.

Example 3.3 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, (I)* ⁴⁷



⁴⁵ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

⁴⁶ Max Harrison, *Rachmaninoff*, 166.

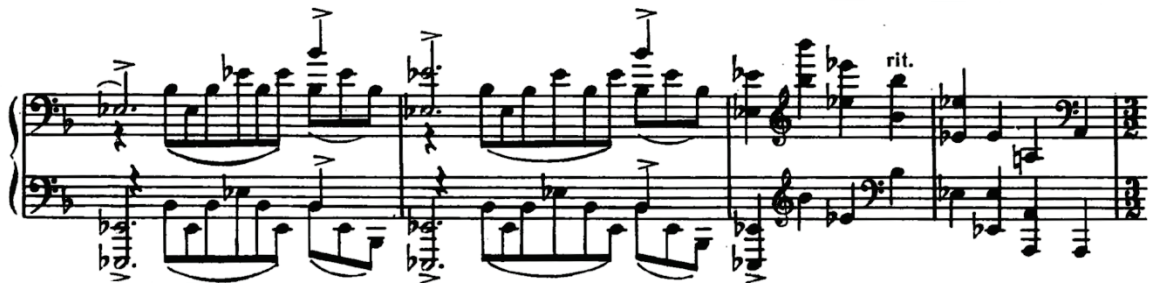
⁴⁷ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, First version, (Moscow: A. Gutheil, n.d.); score.

The first sonata also contains bell-like passages. The opening of the second movement contains quiet bell strikes descending in fifths in the left hand, and the final movement repeats these intervals in a much larger sonority:

Example 3.4 Rachmaninoff, *Piano sonata No. 1, (II)* ⁴⁸



Example 3.5 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, (III)* ⁴⁹



Gerald Abraham, in his book *On Russian Music* demonstrated the popular occurrence of the sharpened 5th (or flattened 6th) in the music of Glinka, and that “the use of this particular chromatic effect is one of the commonest characteristics of nineteenth-century Russian harmony; one finds it on page after page of any Russian “Nationalist” score and on a good many of Tchaikovsky’s-but almost always as a

⁴⁸ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

⁴⁹ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

chromatic effect, a colorful decoration of the diatonic major scale.”⁵⁰ Note Rachmaninoff’s use of the flattened sixth in the left hand of Sonata No. 1, second movement:

Example 3.6 Rachmaninoff, *Piano sonata No. 1, (II)* ⁵¹



This effect is recognizable in other works of Rachmaninoff as well, such as the middle section of the *Oriental Dance*, *Op. 2* mentioned earlier, and also in the theme from the slow movement of the *Fourth Piano Concerto*.

Rachmaninoff’s Russian influence in his piano sonatas is much more evident than in Medtner’s. As mentioned earlier in Medtner’s statement about influence, Medtner was much more careful to not let national influences overtake his work, for fear it would border on imitation. Rachmaninoff composed whatever he felt from the inside, and made no attempts to obscure any obvious influences. Rachmaninoff composed both of the sonatas before he emigrated from Russia in 1917, but he would never relinquish his Russian traits. His music never borders on imitation, as he almost never quoted other works nor attempted to compose like anyone but himself.

⁵⁰ Gerald Abraham, *On Russian music; critical and historical studies of Glinka's operas, Balakirev's works, etc., with chapters dealing with compositions by Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Glazunov, and various other aspects of Russian music*. (London: W. Reeves, limited, 1939), 265.

⁵¹ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

Non-Russian Influence in Rachmaninoff's Sonatas

Rachmaninoff's works owe a lot of their inspiration to Liszt and Chopin. Rachmaninoff's *Variations on a theme of Chopin* and *Nocturne No. 1 in F-sharp minor* for the piano are clear references to Chopin, and his highly technical style bears resemblance to the hardest works of Liszt. Regarding the piano sonatas, it is a bit more difficult to attribute non-Russian influences. The few that are evident will be detailed here.

The first of these influences is the use of the Dies Irae from the Latin Mass. Rachmaninoff would often quote the Dies Irae in his works, perhaps in homage to Liszt's and Berlioz's use of it. In the final movement of Sonata No. 1, we find this chant outlined in the second section:

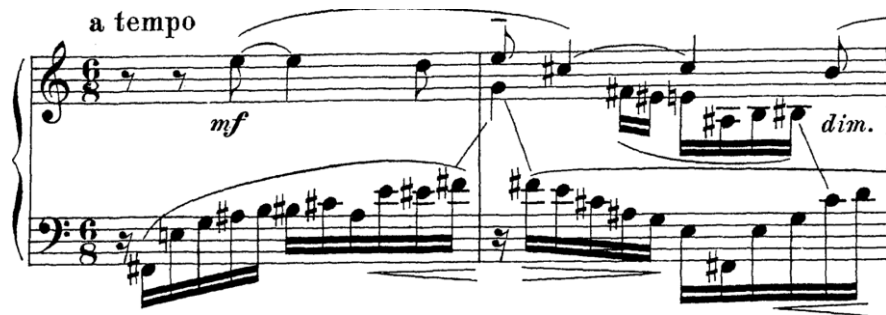
Example 3.7 Rachmaninoff *Piano Sonata No. 1, (III)* ⁵²



The Dies Irae also appears in the melody of the development section of *Piano Sonata No. 2*'s first movement. This was the only direct external quote that Rachmaninoff incorporated into his sonatas. It is less obvious in the second sonata, but the first four-notes are recognizable (Example 3.8):

⁵² Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

Example 3.8 Rachmaninoff *Piano Sonata No. 2, (I)* ⁵³



Like Medtner, he was often inspired by poets and authors from other nationalities. *Sonata No. 1* was composed with Goethe's Faust in mind, and, in similar fashion to Liszt's Faust symphony, with each movement corresponding to a certain literary character in the work. This will be expanded upon in the section about program music, but it is the only known literary affiliation in both of his piano sonatas. His orchestral work, *The Bells*, may also have been a guiding influence for the *Second Piano Sonata* as it was written at the same time.

⁵³ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 36*, First version, (Moscow: A. Gutheil, n.d.); score.

Chapter 4: Influence on each other

Rachmaninoff and Medtner maintained mutual admiration for each other throughout their lifetime. They remained cordial even when criticizing each other's works, and they were influential upon each other. They both shared a dislike for the modernist movement and had many similar philosophies on the purpose of music. Rachmaninoff sent a letter to Medtner in 1934 after reading the first half of *The Muse and the Fashion*, praising Medtner's achievement. Notice his use of the word 'sickness' in describing the modernist movement: "I read it at a single sitting and want to congratulate you on your achievement in a new field. What a lot of interesting, pointed, witty, and profound things are in it! And so timely, too. If this present sickness should some day pass away, though I must confess I don't see this as imminent, your description of it will last forever."⁵⁴

Rachmaninoff performed his *Piano Sonata No. 1* in the summer of 1907 to his friends while stopping in Moscow on the way back to his Ivanovka estate. Medtner was among this small group of acquaintances and heard the piece for the first time.⁵⁵ We do not know Medtner's official reaction to the work, but his Op. 22 sonata (finished 2-3 years later) bears a strong similarity in the opening material⁵⁶ (Example 4.1 and 4.2):

Example 4.1 Medtner, *Sonata in G minor, Op. 22*⁵⁷



⁵⁴ Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime in Music*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 308.

⁵⁵ Bertensson, *Rachmaninoff*, 139.

⁵⁶ Martyn, *Medtner*, 74.

⁵⁷ Medtner, *Piano Sonata Op. 22*, score.

Example 4.2 Rachmaninoff *Piano sonata No. 1, (I)* ⁵⁸



Looking at some of the later works, Medtner's Op. 25 No. 1 was the only sonata that Rachmaninoff incorporated into his concerts, most likely because its length in three small movements was not as intimidating for the audience as some of Medtner's larger and more complicated works. The opening of the second movement is very similar to the 18th variation from Rachmaninoff's *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*. This may have been just a coincidence, since the 18th variation is an upside down version of the Paganini theme, but the fact that this was the only sonata that Rachmaninoff performed in concert makes it entirely possible that this was an inspiration:

Example 4.3 Medtner, *Piano Sonata Op. 25, No. 1 (II)* ⁵⁹

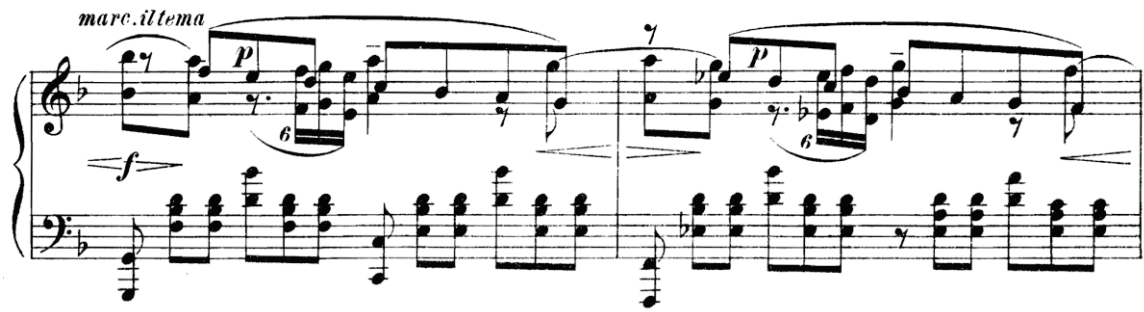


Medtner's Op. 11 No.2 bears similar resemblance to the slow movement of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Sonata No. 2*. Not just in its elegiac mood, but the harmonic progressions and texture bear resemblance:

⁵⁸ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

⁵⁹ Nikolai Medtner, *Piano Sonata, Op. 25 No. 1*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom II: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1959); score.

Example 4.4 Medtner, *Sonata-Elegy*, from *Sonaten-Triade*, Op. 11⁶⁰



Example 4.5 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2*, (II)⁶¹



Some similarities are much more obvious in the sonatas. The fourth movement of Medtner's *Sonata Op. 53 No. 1* bears such a strong resemblance to the *Etudes-Tableaux in B-Minor*, Op. 39 No. 4 of Rachmaninoff that it is hard to believe he was not familiar with the work:

⁶⁰ Nikolai Medtner, *Piano Sonata, Op. 11*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom I: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1959); score.

⁶¹ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 2*, Op. 36, First version, (Moscow: A. Gutheil, n.d.); score.

Example 4.6 Medtner, *Sonata Romantica, Op. 53 No. 1 (IV)*⁶²



Example 4.7 Rachmaninoff, *Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39 No. 4*⁶³



These examples are just a few of the many similarities between Medtner's and Rachmaninoff's compositions. Medtner dedicated his *Piano Sonata Op. 25 No. 2* and his *Second Piano Concerto* to Rachmaninoff, and Rachmaninoff dedicated his *Fourth Piano Concerto* to Medtner. While their friendship wasn't always at its best, (such as the passive-aggressive feud when Rachmaninov did not initially return the favor in *The Bells* after Medtner dedicated Op. 25 No. 2 to him)⁶⁴ they retained in mutual admiration for each other throughout their lifetime.

⁶² Medtner, *Piano Sonata, Op. 53 No. 1*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, score.

⁶³ Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Etudes-Tableaux Op. 39*, ed. Pavel Lamm and Konstantin Igumnov, (Moscow: Muzgiz, n.d.); score.

⁶⁴ Martyn, *Medtner*, 105.

Chapter 5: Modernism

Theorist Josef Yasser met up with Rachmaninoff in a meeting arranged by Alexander Siloti in January of 1932. He brought his new work “A Theory of Evolving Tonality” to gauge Rachmaninoff’s reaction to the concept of a 19-tone scale. Rachmaninoff was intrigued, but pointed out how tonal systems were much slower to change. Yasser recalled the exchange:

[Rachmaninoff] “You probably know how Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev liked to demonstrate the various stages of musical evolution?” I said I did not. “No?” There was a hint of surprise in his voice. “Then it’s worth showing!” He sat at the piano and played several bars of some banal Viennese waltz and, smiling broadly, said: “This, according to Taneyev, represents the first stage of the evolution, and this-as Sergei Ivanovich said-is the second stage” (Rachmaninoff repeated the bars) –“and finally, Taneyev would always end by saying, “Here is the third stage!” (Rachmaninoff again played the same bars.)⁶⁵

While Rachmaninoff understood the modernist movement, he disliked the detachment of human emotion from it. In a response to the *Musical Courier* asking his thoughts about modern music, Rachmaninoff said the following: “The new kind of music seems to come, not from the heart, but from the head. Its composers think rather than feel. They have not the capacity to make their works “exult,” as Hans von Bulow called it. They meditate, protest, analyze, reason, calculate, and brood-but they do not exult. It may be that they compose in the spirit of the times; but it may be, too, that the spirit of the times does not call for expression in music. If that is the case, rather than compile music that is thought but not felt, composers should remain silent and leave contemporary expression to those authors and playwrights who are masters of the factual and literal, and do not concern themselves with soul states.”⁶⁶

Medtner dedicated an entire book on the subject of preserving the traditional methods of composition. *The Muse and the Fashion* is a one hundred and fifty page defense of the preservation of traditional harmony. He firmly believed that certain laws in music should never be broken, and that the desire to become more individual by breaking musical laws was clearly a misguided one.⁶⁷ He struck back against the notion that past musical theory was a hindrance to new creative ideas:

Past theory did not pretend to unfold the mystery of creation, but merely pointed out certain ways for unfolding it. In designating these ways it took care to warn us against eccentric departures from the law – its main theme. It showed a faith in the general law of

⁶⁵ Bertensson, *Rachmaninoff*, 282.

⁶⁶ Bertensson, *Rachmaninoff*, 351-352.

⁶⁷ Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion*, 56-61.

all music, and therefore we also find in it the concept of error, i.e. prohibitions and limitations. It saw the general law of all music in the points of contact, in the agreement of all the individual representatives of our art. Its naïve faith in the general law points to its purely artistic foresight; it not only made no pretensions to being strictly scientific, but also did not lean on any other spheres of knowledge, or any other arts.”⁶⁸

Medtner likened music to a game of chess or cards, illustrating that the combinations in these games are inexhaustible and unrepeatable. One does not have to reinvent the chessboard or create new cards to make an interesting game.⁶⁹

Rachmaninoff and Medtner both shared reservations about the trends taking place around them. Rachmaninoff had always believed that he had to write what came from the heart, and Medtner believed that the rules of music were a universal law that existed for a reason. Both composers were not too public about their opinions, but were very confident in the defense of their compositional methods. Medtner was most offended when his publishing contract had changed terms due to low sales and was told the reason was that contemporary music was more in fashion.⁷⁰ This was a struggle that he faced his entire lifetime. Both were content in acknowledging their past roots, but they both knew it was a sacrifice to remain true to their art, and they took their burden with pride.

Innovation in Medtner

Medtner’s compositional style gains most of its originality from his method of letting the compositional process grow on its own. Tanayev had once described him as being ‘born with sonata form’⁷¹ yet he abandoned Tanayev’s counterpoint class halfway through because it clashed with his belief in the organic process of composition.⁷² He believed in letting a composition come to him through inspiration, as opposed to shifting elements around to make it conform to a specific form or rule set. In one instance, when he presented his Op. 5 sonata to Josef Hofmann, Hofmann told him that it was good that he hadn’t studied the whole theory of composition, because if he had, he “perhaps might not have written this Sonata.”⁷³ Medtner’s father discussed the sonata with his brother Emil, saying the following:

⁶⁸ Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion*, 61.

⁶⁹ Medtner, *The Muse and the Fashion*, 38.

⁷⁰ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner* 174.

⁷¹ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, xi.

⁷² Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 7.

⁷³ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 15.

“As soon as he got down to composition he was bothered by the thought of the unfinished Andante for his Sonata. [...] He said that somehow this form came to him with difficulty, and it was only the other day that he at last managed to achieve a result that satisfied him. [...] He succeeded in developing the original two themes which for a long time would not work out. [...] At one stage he wanted to compromise, choosing other themes less appropriate to the spirit of the whole composition but easier to work on.”⁷⁴

In similar fashion, Medtner relayed to a pupil that he was letting the coda of Op. 11 No. 3 ‘stew’ for a while until the answer came to him.⁷⁵ Medtner would never force his music into a certain form, but would let the form unfold on its own. Medtner was able to retain adherence to the past rules of music, and still achieve originality. Some modern techniques still found their way into his piano sonatas, however. Medtner frequently employed the whole-tone scale, a common characteristic in Impressionism, in most of his piano sonatas.⁷⁶

Medtner’s most striking feature is his emphasis on unusual meters and rhythms. For example, *Piano Sonata Op. 25 No. 2* first movement contains an unusually long passage of 15/8 time, which is very unusual not only in a piano sonata, but in any piano composition written up to this point. (see Ex. 5.1)

⁷⁴ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 25.

⁷⁵ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 43.

⁷⁶ Cenieth Catherine Elmore, “Some Stylistic Considerations in the Piano Sonatas of Nikolai Medtner” (PhD diss., Univeristy of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1972), 41.

Example 5.1 Medtner, *Sonata Op. 25, No. 2* ⁷⁷



Even in his most tonal and lyrical sonatas, he always introduces rhythms that shake the foundations of meter, such as in the *Sonata Reminiscenza Op. 38*:

Example 5.2 Medtner, *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, from *Forgotten Melodies Op. 38* ⁷⁸



Harmonically, Medtner would often venture into highly chromatic areas. For a composer who once said of Prokofiev, “My conclusion is that I do not accept Prokofiev’s music as art or even as a craft,”⁷⁹ it is striking how harmonically similar his chromatic passages are to Prokofiev’s work. Compare the chromatic passage work from the *Sonata-Reminiscenza Op. 38* (ex. 5.3) to the slow movement of Prokofiev’s *Piano Sonata No. 2*. (ex. 5.4)

⁷⁷ Medtner, *Piano Sonata, Op. 25 No. 2*, ed. Aleksandr Gedike; score.

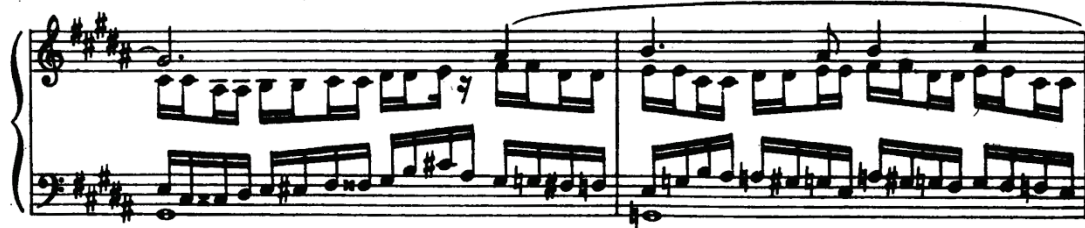
⁷⁸ Medtner, *Forgotten Melodies I, Op. 38*, score.

⁷⁹ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 175.

Example 5.3 Medtner, *Sonata-Reminiscenza*, from *Forgotten Melodies Op. 38* ⁸⁰



Example 5.4 Prokofiev, *Sonata No. 2, (III)* ⁸¹



Chromaticism is a common feature in all of Medtner's piano sonatas. As much as Medtner was defending tonality from the modern era composers, he seemed to use every compositional technique he could to obscure it.⁸² While Medtner had no qualms about adding unconventional harmonies to his music, it must be noted that his themes never abandon tonal principles, and are much less angular than the melodies of Prokofiev and other modern composers. It must also be noted that no dissonance is left unresolved in his works.

Sonata minacciosa, Op. 53 No. 2 is perhaps Medtner's most experimental sonata. He described it as "my most contemporary composition, for it reflects the threatening atmosphere of contemporary events."⁸³ The extreme pianism recalls passagework from Rachmaninoff's most difficult works, and

⁸⁰ Medtner, *Forgotten Melodies I, Op. 38*, score.

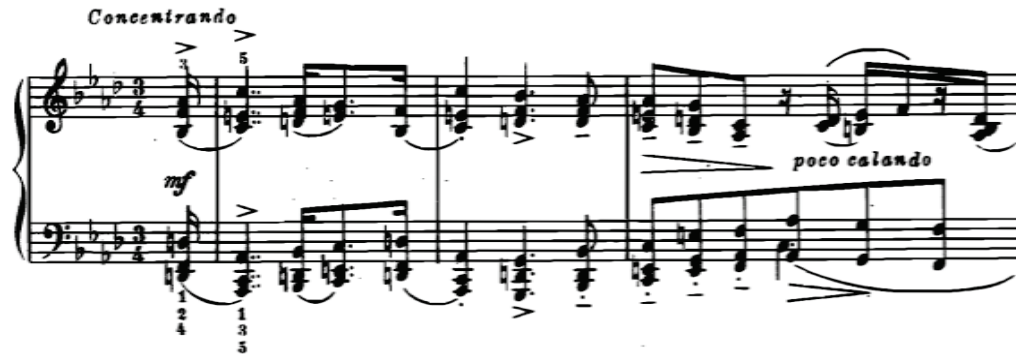
⁸¹ Sergei Prokofiev, *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 14*, ed. Levon Atovmyan (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1955); score.

⁸² Charles William Keller, "The Piano Sonatas of Nikolai Medtner," (PhD Diss., Ohio State University, 1971), 332.

⁸³ Martyn, *Nicolas Medtner*, 207.

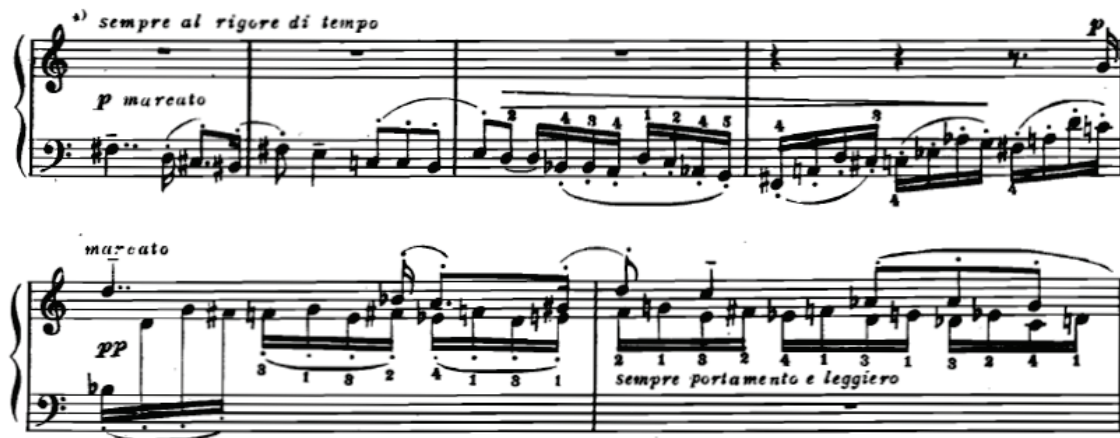
although it is one movement, it is one of the most challenging of all of Medtner's sonatas. The opening material bears a striking unusual harmonic progression of augmented and diminished triads:

Example 5.5 Medtner, *Sonata minacciosa*, Op. 53 No. 2 ⁸⁴



This sonata contains many elements that would seemingly fit the modernist aesthetic like a glove, and if Medtner promoted it as such it might have gained more attention. The key signature is abandoned in the development, and the fugue in Ex. 5.6 is on the brink of tonality:

Example 5.6 Medtner, *Sonata minacciosa*, Op. 53 No. 2 ⁸⁵



⁸⁴ Nikolai Medtner, *Sonata minacciosa*, Op. 53 No. 2, ed. Aleksandr Gedike, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Tom IV: *Sochineniia dlia fortepiano* (Moscow: Muzgiz, 1960); score.

⁸⁵ Medtner, *Sonata minacciosa*, Op. 53 No. 2; score.

Medtner would often shift from the highly dissonant to the highly tonal from one sonata to the next. No better example of this is in the final two sonatas of Medtner. The *Sonata minacciosa* Op. 53 No. 2 above and the *Sonata-Idylle* Op. 56 represent the dichotomy of the composer's compositional style. In direct contrast to Op. 53 No. 2, *Sonata-Idylle* is one of his most melodic and tonal creations. Perhaps this is a farewell of sorts, in a similar fashion to Prokofiev's *Symphony No. 7*, where the material is very tonal and melodic.

Medtner's piano music is almost always entirely pianistic. Medtner avoided composing for the orchestra, and the only sonata that he considered turning into an orchestral work was Op. 25 No. 2.⁸⁶ Even so, this work is far less orchestral than both of Rachmaninoff's piano sonatas. Much of Medtner's individuality is due to his ability to remain original while retaining a piano two-handed texture. There are elements of fugal writing, and more than two voices in counterpoint, but the texture is hard to ascribe to anything except the keyboard.

Innovation in the Rachmaninoff sonatas

Rachmaninoff's First Sonata is one of the first known piano sonatas with a known program. While the theme of the program may have been hidden from the public, this knowledge shows how Rachmaninoff favored the narrative over the form. The complexity of the piano writing is also unique to the genre. At times, the textures push the piano to its limits in terms of voicing. In the first movement before the second theme, Rachmaninoff clearly had an orchestral texture in mind:

Example 5.7 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28 (I)*⁸⁷



⁸⁶ Martyn, *Medtner*, 88.

⁸⁷ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

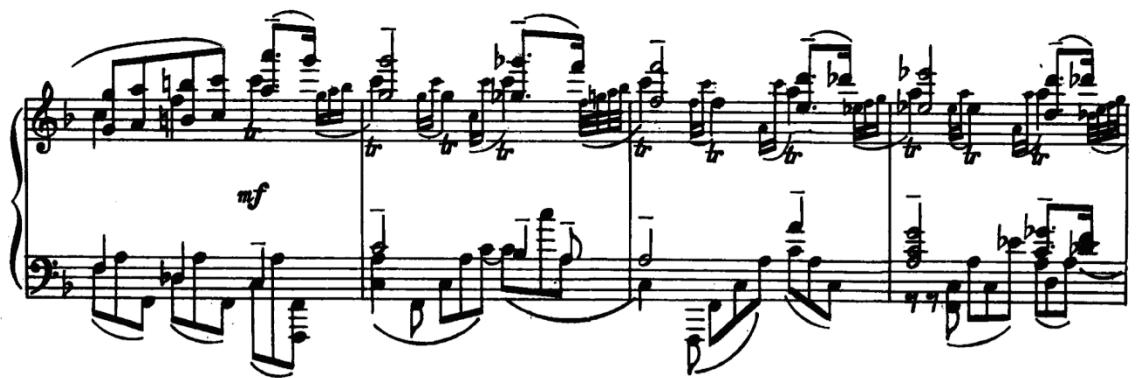
The number of inner voices here are almost too much for the keyboard to effectively encompass. Similar problems occur in the development, where the triplet figure in the left hand is superimposed over a rising scale of quarter notes:

Example 5.8 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28 (I)*⁸⁸



Rachmaninoff's orchestral textures make it clear that was thinking symphonically during the construction of this work. The climax of the second movement is akin to a solo piano transcription of an entire piano concerto: (Ex. 5.9)

Example 5.9 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28 (II)*⁸⁹



In addition to the complexity of the work, something must be said of the simplicity of it as well. The single note theme in the first movement is a daring endeavor, as it repeats multiple times throughout the work. (Ex. 5.10)

⁸⁸ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

⁸⁹ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

Example 5.10 Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28 (I)*⁹⁰

Moderato (♩=60)

The musical score is for the first movement of Rachmaninoff's Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28. It is in 3/4 time with a tempo of Moderato (♩=60). The score is written for piano and right hand. The first system shows a piano introduction with a p (piano) dynamic, followed by a right-hand melody with mf (mezzo-forte) dynamics and triplet markings. The second system includes a ritardando (rit.) section followed by a return to a tempo, with dynamics ranging from p to mf. The score is written in B-flat major and 3/4 time.

The second sonata is striking in its use of chromaticism in its themes. The harmony is certainly more obscure and dissonant than the first sonata, evoking textures from the third piano concerto, written 4 years or so earlier, and also the harmonies of Scriabin. This sonata is much less like the traditional Rachmaninoff encountered in the first sonata, and much more like the thunderous works of some of his obscure preludes and etudes.

It was mentioned earlier that the second sonata was written in conjunction with the orchestral work *The Bells*. While a program was never revealed for this sonata, it is clear that some of the inspiration from working on *The Bells* transferred over to this sonata. The bell sonorities are saturated into the work, and as the orchestral suite set out emulate different types of bells in each movement, Rachmaninoff seemed to devise every type of bell sonority that he could imagine on the piano.

⁹⁰ Rachmaninoff, *Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 28*, score.

Rachmaninoff was less ambitious when he revised the work many years later, perhaps afraid that it was too convoluted in its textures. Many still prefer the earlier version, as it showcases the pianist much more. Rachmaninoff's innovation in the piano sonatas, in contrast to Medtner, is his ability to encompass textures much larger than the traditional piano texture. While the music may seem overabundant in its sonorities, it remains entirely pianistic. He was less concerned with form, even complaining to his friend at one point that he couldn't figure out the form of the first movement of his own sonata after composing it, wondering if it was one of those "accursed Rondo forms in Beethoven's piano sonatas".⁹¹ His ability to create massive soundscapes and a narrative from a single instrument is his greatest achievement in the sonatas.

⁹¹ Bertensson, *Rachmaninoff*, 133.

Chapter 6: Program music in the piano sonatas

Medtner defined program music as music created for no other purpose except to tell a story. In his mind, the form and harmony are all submissive to the narrative. In his book *Muse and the Fashion*, Medtner discussed how people tend to assume that works with titles that are more descriptive than the generic titles of sonata, rondo, etc. are automatically assumed to have a hidden program associated with it. Medtner's response to this is:

In reality, however, program music is only music in which the form itself and contents are dictated and justified by a certain program or subject matter. Thus the very strict sonata form of Beethoven's *Coriolanus* (a title which reflects merely the heroic mood, and not the historic subject of *Coriolanus*) precludes any possibility of assigning this work to the category of program music, and one might far rather suspect some program which Beethoven had in mind when he constructed some of the forms in his last sonatas and quartets that have no program heading.⁹²

This is important to understand since the majority of Medtner's sonatas have descriptive titles. With Medtner's obsession with form, it is a safe assumption that all of the epigraphs and titles of his 14 piano sonatas were not guided by a narrative or other programmatic idea. He was sometimes hesitant to add some of these titles and epigraphs to his works, such as the epigraph of Op. 11 where Goethe is quoted, a quote that he apparently later regretted.⁹³ Nevertheless, his works are abundant with descriptive titles which most likely refer to the general mood rather than a particular narrative. Medtner went so far as to incorporate text painting into his works. In Op. 25 No. 2, Medtner wrote the word "slu-shay-tye" (Russian for 'listen') in the opening triplet figure of the manuscript.⁹⁴

Rachmaninoff, while keeping with the tradition of remaining secretive about programmatic ideas, was quite the opposite of Medtner. He had no qualms about using programmatic ideas to guide the creation of his works. We know this by the occasional admittance in his letters to colleagues. When Koussevitsky proposed that Rachmaninoff choose a selection of his *Etudes-Tableaux* for Respighi to orchestrate, he was

⁹² Medtner, *Muse and the Fashion*, 124.

⁹³ Martyn, *Medtner*, 42.

⁹⁴ Martyn, *Medtner*, 86.

delighted to reveal to Respighi some of his ideas. While most of his revelations were small in specifics (for example, “sea and the seagulls”, and “little red riding hood”), he was quite detailed on the *Etudes-tableaux in C minor, Op. 39 No. 7*:

The fifth Etude in C minor [op. 39, No. 7] is a funeral march. Let me dwell on this a moment longer. I am sure you will not mock a composer’s caprices. The initial theme is a march. The other theme represents the singing of a choir. Commencing with the movement in 16ths in C minor and a little further on in E-flat minor a fine rain is suggested, incessant and hopeless. This movement develops, culminating in C minor- the chimes of a church. The finale returns to the first theme, a march.⁹⁵

Concerning the two piano sonatas of Rachmaninoff, we have evidence that his first sonata had a programmatic idea as a basis. Consider a letter from fellow pianist Konstantin Igumnov: “When, after the Leipzig concert, I stopped in Dresden to see the Rachmaninoffs, I learned from him that when he composed this Sonata he had had Goethe’s *Faust* in mind, and that the first movement corresponds to *Faust*, the second to Gretchen, and the third, to the flight to Brocken, and Mephistopheles [in the exact order of Liszt’s *Faust Symphony*].”⁹⁶ Even more intriguing is that Rachmaninoff admitted to being guided by its programmatic idea: “The sonata is certainly wild and interminable. I think it takes about 45 minutes. I was lured into this length by its guiding idea. This is-three contrasting types from a literary work. Of course no program will be indicated, though I begin to think that the sonata would be clearer if the program were revealed.”⁹⁷

In contrast to Medtner, who treasured form over the narrative in his sonatas, Rachmaninoff composed in an opposite manner, where a program would be the guiding force for his work. In as much as these two composers are similar, they approached the compositional process quite differently. While not as ground-breaking as Medtner in the composition of his piano sonatas, Rachmaninoff was able to bring pianism to new heights and was able to demonstrate the capabilities of the piano in creating a large orchestral sound palette.

⁹⁵ Bertensson, *Rachmaninoff*, 262-263.

⁹⁶ Bertensson, *Rachmaninoff*, 153.

⁹⁷ Bertensson, *Rachmaninoff*, 138.

Conclusions

While Medtner and Rachmaninoff's sonatas achieved significant strides toward reinvigorating the sonata form, their efforts have had little impact on the next generation of composers. Their achievements have remained unnoticed for nearly a century after their works were composed, and only recently have their sonatas been reacquainted with the concert halls. Medtner's piano sonatas achieved goals that are difficult for the listener to fully grasp without becoming very familiar with the works. After hearing Medtner's *Piano Sonata Op. 25, No. 2*, the critic Grigory Prokofiev said the following: "The sonata is powerfully and strongly constructed, and it is not even saturated with scholasticism or academicism, but the composer's eyes are set on such far distances that almost no-one will follow him there."⁹⁸ When Horowitz attempted to premiere Op. 22 in America, one critic proclaimed: "Not one phrase of it quickens the pulse or causes one to crave for further acquaintance with the composer's other creations."⁹⁹ The technical difficulty of these sonatas and the complexity of the music have proven a challenge for modern-day audiences and pianists to digest. Fortunately, recent recordings have made it possible for many to become acquainted with the works outside of the concert hall, but the accessibility of these works is still a problem for most concert venues trying to lure in the public. Modern music is also a challenge for most concert halls, but it is easier to generate excitement over something that is new and completely different.

Perhaps Medtner's own modesty is partially to blame for the lack of success of these sonatas, as Rachmaninoff was much more successful at promoting his own works. Rachmaninoff's second sonata has achieved success, but the first sonata, which contains material that is just as approachable as his symphonies and second piano concerto, has only recently been picking up activity in the concert halls. Its early dismissal by critics is partially to blame for its lack of success, as it was for his first symphony.

If Rachmaninoff and Medtner had been born 30 years earlier, it makes one wonder how their success would have been different. On the other hand, much of what they accomplished was based on their grounding in the music that came before them. They were not determined to incorporate nationalist ideas in their music, but instead they let the influences freely happen.

⁹⁸ Martyn, *Medtner*, 89.

⁹⁹ Martyn, *Medtner*, 76.

Rachmaninoff has achieved success through his revival in the second half of the twentieth century, as its accessibility had a huge impact in renewing interest for his work. While Medtner's music is difficult for audiences who have never heard it, it is far easier to listen to than some of the experimental music of the modern era. So perhaps as ears grow tired of the absence of tonality and meter, audiences will be much more forgiving of Medtner's music and will give it a second listen. It is remarkable that he was able to create so much innovation while remaining true to the 19th century principles. Russian philosopher and musicologist Ivan Ilyin stated the following about Medtner in his essay *Sonata Form in Medtner*: "When our sickly generation is gone, the process of disintegration is over, and chaos is pushed back into the abyss whence it came, one of the musical thinkers of the future will write *a history of the sonata*. He will find, to begin with, that at the time of the greatest crisis and decadence, when unscrupulous inventors committed unheard-of offences and blasphemies in art, the form of sonata was given new artistic meaning and depth and revealed to the world in fresh brilliance. This was done by Medtner."¹⁰⁰ In answer to the original question of whether these sonatas were troubled because of the time they were born in, or in their compositional merits, it seems the modernist movement did have some sway in their lack of popularity, but had better marketing methods been in place, these sonatas could have achieved much larger successes. The compositional merits are tremendous, and hopefully future attempts by pianists to introduce unknown repertoire in their programs will change the public perception of these works.

¹⁰⁰ Ivan Ilyin, "Sonata Form in Medtner," in *Nicolas Medtner: A Tribute to his Art and Personality*, ed. Richard Holt (London: Dennis Dobson LTD, 1955), 180.

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